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Watching Doesn't Make Us Violent: Assessing the Research on Media Violence

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Editor: Noah Berlatsky

Date: 2012

From: Media Violence

Publisher: Gale, a Cengage Company

Series: Opposing Viewpoints

Document Type: Viewpoint essay

Length: 2,950 words

Content Level: (Level 4)

Lexile Measure: 1270L

Full Text:

Article Commentary

David Trend, "2: Watching Doesn't Make Us Violent: Assessing the Research on Media Violence," *The Myth of Media Violence: A Critical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007, pp. 37-43. Copyright © 2007 by John Wiley and Sons. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

"In the aggregate the research says that media violence *does not correlate* to aggression."

In the following viewpoint, University of California professor David Trend contends that most scientific studies of the effects of media violence have been inconclusive. He says that studies are generally flawed in their methods, in part because studying the relationship between people and entertainment is very complicated. The results that have been produced, he argues, show little correlation between viewing media and increased aggression. For political reasons, however, he says, links between media and aggression are often exaggerated. Trend is a professor of studio art at the University of California, Irvine.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. What does Trend say are two big problems of scientifically studying the effects of media violence?
2. Why are laboratory experiments the largest category of research on media violence, according to Trend?
3. What problems did Richard Rhodes find with the study of media violence by Eron and Huesmann?

What about children? It is commonly assumed that children are more attracted to violent imagery and more vulnerable to its harmful effects, especially when it comes to imitation. Bruno Bettelheim is largely responsible for a belief circulated in the 1970s that children had a "natural" attraction to violence. In his widely read *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*,¹ Bettelheim asserted that frightening stories help kids to understand their innate aggressive tendencies and to eventually control them as adults. These beliefs persist today and provide rationalizations, not only for the continued exposure that children experience through traditional fairy tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Hansel and Gretel," but also in the invariably violent narratives of Disney feature films like *Chronicles of Narnia* (2005) and *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006) that feature violent death as primary plot ingredients. Writing of the widespread use of violence in children's media, Maria Tatar states that "Bettelheim's views [becoming] the prevailing orthodoxy on fairy tales is symptomatic of our cultural willingness to embrace the view that 'delinquent and violent' tendencies are part of human nature and that children, in particular, must learn to manage this innate behavior."²

Children and Violence

Yet nowhere in the literature or science of media violence has there been any documentation that children are naturally disposed to violence. Despite this paucity of evidence, children remain at the center of the media violence debate. In part this is because topics like "childhood," "children's welfare," and "the death of childhood" work so effectively in emotionalizing political arguments. The meanings of such terms can be quite variable, ranging from references to innocent children that need adult protection, to menacing children who take weapons to school, to the inner child, the childlike adult, and the adult-like child. In other words, childhood is not a natural or fixed category. It is a screen upon which adults project their social anxieties and desires. The figure of the child has been used historically to promote issues ranging from environmentalism ("children inherit the earth") to tax reform ("mortgaging our

children's future"). David Buckingham writes about the "politics of substitution" that childhood enables:

In a climate of growing uncertainty, invoking fears about children provides a powerful means of commanding public attention and support: campaigns against homosexuality are redefined as campaigns against pedophiles; campaigns against pornography become campaigns against child pornography; campaigns against immorality and Satanism become campaigns against ritualistic child abuse. Those who have the temerity to doubt claims about the epidemic proportions of such phenomena can easily therefore be stigmatized as hostile to children.³

When all else fails in the media violence debate, proponents of surveillance and censorship haul out the image of the helpless and vulnerable child. While it is true that children don't have the same capabilities as adults, it can also be said that these projections at times discredit the intelligence of young people and contribute to a distorted infantilization. Close examination of children's responses to violent cartoons, for example, reveals that they more often respond to the excitement or excess of imagery in general, what Tatar terms "burlesque violence," than to the purposeful brutality of "retaliatory violence." When children write their own fairy tales, they tend to avoid this latter type of violence and write happy endings for all of the characters.⁴ Like adults, children do revel in the arousal and excitement of aggressive representation in what Michael Zuckerman termed the "sensation seeking" motive.⁵ Parents often worry about children over-identifying with perpetrators of television or movie violence. Surprisingly, there is very little data on this. What the research has shown is that most children don't imagine themselves committing violence, although roughly half empathize with victims of violence.⁶ Even less plausible is the "forbidden fruit" theory that children's desire is increased if attempts are made to restrict access to a program. A variety of studies in the 1970s disproved this widely accepted theory.⁷

Researching the Effects of Media Violence

Groups seeking to influence public policy know the importance of "objective" research in making their claims. Psychologists and other social scientists have sought to correlate exposure to violent media with certain "effects" among viewers such as aggression, desensitization, or fear. Often this involves laboratory research studies in which violent films or videos are shown to groups of children or adults, who subsequently answer questions about aggression. These findings are compared to those from a control group exposed to non-violent media. Some researchers observe the behavior of study subjects after viewing the media or they create situations where aggressive acts (hitting an inflatable doll, for example) may take place. Frequently in these experiments, viewers of violent media do indeed exhibit relatively small and short-term predilections for increased aggression. Laboratory experiments have led researchers to believe that media violence leads people to imitate what they see on the screen in their own lives. How does this work? According to psychologist Leonard Berkowitz, aggressive behavior occurs when viewers of violent media experience situations that remind them of something they've seen in a representation.⁸ Another psychologist, Dolf Zillmann, asserts that violent media make viewers so excited that ordinary behaviors become amplified into violent ones.⁹

Other empirical research employs surveys or data analysis conducted outside the laboratory. The more nuanced of these seek to measure the effect of long-term exposure to media violence, rather than the cause-and-effect consequence of a single viewing. This move into what has been termed "cultivation" research is seen as a more naturalistic approach to the measurement of media effects. One of the originators of cultivation theory, George Gerbner, writes, "Television is a centralized system of storytelling. Its drama, commercials, news, and other programs bring a relatively coherent system of images and messages into every home. That system cultivates from infancy the predisposition and preferences that used to be acquired from other 'primary sources.'"¹⁰ In this light, cultivation describes the "contributions television viewing makes to viewer conceptions of social reality."¹¹

Generally speaking, there are two big problems in "scientifically" studying media violence. The first problem stems from how terribly difficult it is to study complex human behavior. A researcher first needs to figure out how to isolate the behavior and then to establish whether one thing or many things cause it. Human violence is influenced by many elements: brain chemistry, environment, upbringing, culture, and the immediate circumstances around it. Studying any one of these factors by itself is quite a challenge. Then add the complexity of the ways people consume, interpret, and are influenced by the media. People do not simply view a TV show or a deodorant advertisement and then robotically go out and act upon this experience. They enjoy, transform, reject, ignore, remember or forget the messages they receive. How do you study that?

The second problem has to do with logic. Most scientific studies set out to prove a correlation between watching violent media and a behavioral change. Perhaps a study shows that boys who see the *Doom* or *King Kong* (both 2005) movies are more likely to smash their toys. There is a correlation between watching the movies and doing the smashing. But this doesn't necessarily mean that the boys responded because of the movie. Perhaps a portion of the movie or an external element affected their behavior. Simple as this sounds, this problem of logic has dogged much of the science on media violence. Well-designed research studies can rule out some of the distorting effects of outside variables, but such studies are expensive and time-consuming. Major categories of empirical media violence research include laboratory research, field studies, and longitudinal (long-term) research.

Laboratory and Field Research

When most people think about the science of media violence they are thinking about laboratory research findings. This is the largest category of research and the one type of research capable of clearly proving cause-and-effect relationships. It is relatively quick and less expensive than extensive studies involving field research, interviews, or the long-term tracking of research subjects. For all of these reasons, empirical findings from laboratory experiments have been sought by groups seeking definitive answers about media violence. Laboratory experiments have been the centerpiece of what has been called the "effects" field in media violence.

Overall, the laboratory studies of the effects of media violence have shown small, short-term increases in aggressive behavior among participants viewing violent material. In one early and widely referenced study conducted in the 1960s by O.I. Lovaas, children in several cohorts were exposed to violent and non-violent cartoons.¹² In one of the cohorts the children who had seen the violent

material exhibited a slightly more violent attitude immediately afterwards. In another group, viewers of both violent and non-violent films became more aggressive. Although the study was publicized later as "proving" the negative effects of media violence, the amount of influence the films had was relatively small and not long-acting. In another study conducted by C.W. Mueller and E. Donnerstein, subjects viewed aggressive, humorous, or neutral films and then were offered the chance to act aggressively.¹³ Participants who had seen the aggressive or humorous films were more aggressive than those who had seen the neutral material. But in this instance no significant difference could be found between responses to the aggressive and the humorous films, leading observers to conclude that the aggressive behavior might have resulted from being excited or from "arousal," as one paper expressed it. These studies typify much of the laboratory research on media violence in that they can be said to have yielded evidence about the effects of viewing aggressive material. But they have been criticized for the overall weakness of their findings.

One of the most comprehensive assessments of media violence laboratory research was conducted in the late 1990s by psychologist Jonathan L. Freedman.¹⁴ According to Freedman, many references by groups like the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Psychiatry to large numbers of media violence studies ranging from 1,000 to 3,500 in some accounts can be sourced to a single frequently cited statement in a National Institute of Mental Health report of the 1980s that there existed approximately 2,500 *publications* on the topic. This is hardly the same as a comparable number of empirical studies. Freedman suggests that the question of the number of studies may really be an issue of semantics. After exhaustive investigation, Freedman found that the media violence "effects" literature actually consisted of 200 pieces of non-duplicated research of varying degrees of scientific legitimacy. The most credible of these studies were able to document but minimal correlations or trace "effects" resulting in increased aggressive behavior among those studied.

Most often the effects of media violence were demonstrated through laboratory experiments, which in more recent years have been criticized for the way they decontextualize media in environments quite unlike everyday viewing. Of the 87 laboratory experiments Freedman examined, he asserts that 37 percent supported the effects hypothesis, 41 percent disproved it, and 22 percent were inconclusive. This means that in the aggregate the research says that media violence *does not correlate* to aggression. Studies using survey techniques produced similar ambiguities, showing an aggregate positive correlation between violent media and aggression between 0.1 and 0.2. This means that the studies were able to show that but 1-4 percent of the aggression expressed by the people surveyed could be attributed to media violence. Statisticians would consider this an extremely weak correlation. These findings were compromised further in their use of smaller samples. Also, many failed when attempts were made to reproduce the findings in a second study.¹⁵

Finally, there are several other problems with laboratory research. The most commonly heard is that the laboratory experimentation takes place in an environment dramatically different from one where the effects of media violence might be diluted by distraction, conversation, or outside influence. Also, laboratory research is more vulnerable to what has been termed "experimenter demand," that is, the thinking by research subjects that they are expected to exhibit some kind of behavior because of the experiment. Put another way, the artificiality of the laboratory environment makes people behave differently than they would normally.

Field experiments constitute another broad category of effects, generally favored because they provide a more natural environment than the laboratory. They also tend to be more long-term. ... One of the most famous field studies was carried out in 1971 by Feshbach and Singer, who studied 625 boys in seven residential boarding academies and reform schools in California and New York.¹⁶ In both types of institution the boys' access to television was controlled for six weeks, with half being permitted to watch only non-violent programs and the other violent shows. Astonishingly, the boys in the violent program cohort exhibited fewer acts of violent behavior like acting up in class, fighting, or breaking things than the non-violent cohort. It turned out that the non-violent cohort were made unhappy because they couldn't watch their favorite violent shows. While many other field experiments have shown a relationship between viewing violence and aggressive behavior, the Feshbach and Singer study holds significance in pointing out one of the major drawbacks of field research. Studying groups in natural environments over long periods of time limits the researchers' ability to correct for extraneous factors that might muddle their findings. In this case researchers didn't take into account the effect of the boys' existing viewing preferences and that those preferences might override or cause a backfire in how the boys reacted to the study protocol.

Long-Term Research

The most famous study of the long-term effects of media violence was conducted from 1960 to 1982 by psychologists Leonard D. Eron and L. Rowell Huesmann.¹⁷ The idea behind what came to be called the "22-Year Study" was to look at the difference between children who grew up with violent media and those who were not exposed to such material. Over the years the findings reported that aggression grew among boys, but not among girls, who watched violent shows. Eron and Huesmann reported their findings to the Office of the US Surgeon General in the 1970s and to the National Institute of Mental Health. Their findings were cited by Congress in the 1996 Telecommunications Act that put in place the V-chip requirement in later years, stating that "Studies have shown that children exposed to violent video programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children not so exposed."¹⁸

In 2000, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Richard Rhodes took up the media violence issue in a report entitled "The Media Violence Myth."¹⁹ In preparing the report, Rhodes interviewed major figures in the media violence field like Eron and Huesmann, pressing them to answer critics who had questioned the validity of their findings. Eron told Rhodes of the pressures that had been put upon researchers by government officials who wanted them to find negative effects stating that the scientists really hadn't concluded that their research proved much of a link between viewing habits and later aggression. Only a few boys seemed to have changed their habits over the years and most weren't affected at all. Huesmann later admitted that the "proof" in the study that had fueled so much fervor and resulted in legislative action was derived from a handful of boys and that he and his collaborators had never thought that media alone could be the cause of antisocial behavior. Huesmann has "deliberately misrepresented his findings," Rhodes charges. Huesmann has claimed that there is a strong relationship between "early violence viewing and later criminality." Yet his

conclusion was based on only three cases among 145 adult males who watched action television shows as children.

"There's no evidence that mock violence makes people violent, and there's some evidence that it makes them more peaceful," Rhodes concludes.²⁰ Rhodes is also critical of the work of Brandon Centerwall, another scientist whose studies are frequently cited by legislators and other advocates of restricting media violence.²¹ Centerwall, a psychiatrist whose research was a mainstay of the Senate Judiciary Committee's 1999 report, "Children, Violence and the Media: A Report for Parents and Policy Makers," claims that the introduction of television doubles the violent crime rate. Rhodes cites evidence showing that violent crime rates in Europe and Japan either stayed the same or declined in the years following the introduction of television. Rhodes argues that Centerwall's theory is also contradicted by falling US crimes rates despite continuing and even increased exposure to media.

Footnotes:Footnotes

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2. Maria Tatar, *Violent Delights in Children's Literature*, in Goldstein, *Why We Watch*, p. 71.
3. David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 11.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
5. Michael Zuckerman, *Sensation Seeking: Beyond the Optimal Level of Arousal* (New York: Wiley, 1979).
6. Maria Tatar, *Violent Delights*, p. 98.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
8. Leonard Berkowitz, *Some Effects of Observed Aggression*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2 (1965): 359-69.
9. Zillmann, *The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence*.
10. George Gerbner, Michael Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli, and James Shanahan, *Growing Up with Television: Cultivation Processes*, in Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillman, eds., *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), p. 47.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
12. O. I. Lovaas, *Effects of Exposure to Symbolic Expression on Aggressive Behaviour*, *Child Development*, 32 (1961): 37-44.
13. C. W. Mueller and E. Donnerstein, *Film Induced Arousal and Aggressive Behavior*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, 119, no. 1 (1983): pp. 61-7.
14. Freedman, *Media Violence*.
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16. Feshbach and Singer, *Television and Aggression*.
17. Leonard D. Eron and L. Rowell Huesmann, *Television and the Aggressive Child: A Cross-National Comparison* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981).
18. Fowles, *Case for Television Violence*, p. 126.
19. Richard Rhodes, *The Media Violence Myth*, *New York Times*, Op-Ed page, September 17, 2000.
20. *Ibid.*
21. US Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Children, Violence, and the Media: A Report for Parents and Policy Makers* (September 14, 1999), in Louise I. Gerdes, ed., *Media Violence: Opposing Viewpoints* (San Diego, CA: Greenhaven, 2004), <http://commdocs.house.gov/committees/judiciary/>. Accessed October 11, 2005.

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Trend, David. "Watching Doesn't Make Us Violent: Assessing the Research on Media Violence." *Media Violence*, edited by Noah Berlatsky, Greenhaven Press, 2012. Opposing Viewpoints. *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EJ3010153285/OVIC?u=rock77357&sid=OVIC&xid=e85e14a2>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2020. Originally published as "2: Watching Doesn't Make Us Violent: Assessing the Research on Media Violence," *The Myth of Media Violence: A Critical Introduction*, vol. 37, Malden, MA, 2007.

Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010153285